INTERNAUT
Shawn P. McCarthy

Agencies can lend a hand to users via online help desks

In an era of dirt-cheap and even downright free PCs, one important component has suddenly gone missing: the help desk.

In years past, reputable systems makers ensured that customers' PCs stayed up and running by sponsoring toll-free help numbers. Some even operated service centers where software glitches could be fixed. Agencies picked up on the trend and set up their own help desks, then began to outsource the work to contractors.

As the price of a PC has slipped below $1,000, makers' slipping profit margins oblige them to discontinue phone help. Tech support over the Internet is stepping in to fill some of the gap. Specialized help sites are starting to give both automated support and one-on-one consulting for users who need technical advice. Call it e-support.

The goal is to cut the labor cost of handling help calls, especially for questions that can be answered without a human. When they cannot, the goal is to use tech resources more efficiently.

Helping hand

Agency help desks can pick up some cost-cutting ideas by studying the way this new breed of service is structured.

Instead of leaving a downsized impression, the automated help desks in fact make a computer manufacturer look good. They streamline ease of use to the point where subscribers can sometimes fix their PCs with a click of a Web link.

In a competitive market, it's worth looking at which vendors offer such services when your agency has a new contract to fill.

The online help function starts by feeding inquiries through an automated system. Although it begins with questions and a decision tree, it's not limited to that. Subscribers can make real-time data exchanges for remote diagnosis and downloading repair patches. If the problem isn't as simple as resetting defaults, scripts can be run to check for and resolve conflicts.

Such service is likely to expand far beyond PC makers. It could become a major new type of online service. I can foresee government offices and large companies setting up accounts with help services because they are cheaper than maintaining armies of tech support personnel or buying service contracts to cover every machine.

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Navy: One card is smart idea

Service's smart-card initiative exec eyes challenge of full interoperability

BY WILLIAM JACKSON
GCN Staff

After scores of pilot programs, the government is committing itself in a big way to using smart cards—up to 10 million in the Navy alone over the next three years.

"Our intent is to do away with a multitude of cards," said Tony Cieri, director of the Navy's smart-card initiatives, at the recent annual meeting of the Smart Card Forum in Washington.

The Navy will begin issuing plastic cards with programmable chips to active Navy and Marine personnel next year. Distribution will expand to retired and reserve personnel, civilian employees, contractors and dependents over the following three years. The cards will serve not only for identification but for building and network access, records storage and financial management. They will incorporate digital certificates.

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The goal is complete interoperability for "any chip, any card, any reader, any host," Cieri said.

Making one card do everything everywhere will not be easy, however, because each will have to interoperate with numerous legacy Navy databases. "We can't do that yet," Cieri said.

The General Services Administration expects to take a step toward interoperability with its Common Access ID program, a governmentwide contract for interoperable smart cards expected to be awarded in February.

GSA planned to release a request for proposals Oct. 15.

The Defense Department, which Cieri said could use up to 40 million cards, already is committed to using the contract, and the State Department, IRS and Social Security Administration are expected to be early adopters, said Mickey Femino, director of GSA's Office of Smart Card Initiatives.

"I really do believe this will be the vehicle that will jump-start" smart cards in the government, Femino said.

Carrying the load

The multipurpose card can carry not only a photo and lettering resembling a conventional ID card, but also a magnetic stripe, bar code and smart chip. The chip, which can hold 8M or more of data and interface with computer systems, is updatable and programmable.

At least a dozen departments and agencies have experimented with smart cards since 1997, with DOD running at least nine pilots. GSA has conducted four or more.

Others participating in pilots include the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, Veterans Affairs, Health and Human Services, and Agriculture, and SSA, NASA, the Health Care Financing Administration, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The applications they have tried range from ID, building and computer access to equipment tracking, stored value, records storage and digital certificate authentication.

The Navy and the Army issue cards to incoming recruits for purchases at training bases and from nearby merchants. Even chapels on the bases are equipped with readers to accept digital donations.

Navy battle groups in the Atlantic and Pacific fleets have issued cards to access automated teller machines, track weapons and pay for food services.

"The migration and culture shift is still happening on ships," Cieri said.

He estimated the service has about 200,000 cards, many of which will have to be replaced when the service starts using digital certificates for secure authentication in a public-key infrastructure. The National Security Agency and the Defense Information Systems Agency will be certificate authorities for the Navy's PKI program.

Successful pilots have not sped up acceptance of the cards, however, because applications until now have been limited to one or two functions, making them too expensive.

Photo courtesy of the Navy

Tony Cieri, director of the Navy's smart-card initiatives, says the task of making one card do everything will not be easy.

"How do we expect these cards to succeed if we don't do multiple things with them?" Cieri asked.

GSA formed a project managers' group about two years ago with representatives from more than 40 agencies. They set out to define technical guidelines for government-wide cards that will work across agency boundaries. The result is Common Access ID.

"We're trying to communicate with everybody," Femino said. ■

Looking to maintain systems capabilities, General Dynamics sees GTE as a good fit

BY WILLIAM JACKSON
GCN Staff

GTE Government Systems Corp., which supplies goods and services to many military and civilian agencies, will fit in better with its new owner, General Dynamics Corp., than it did with telecommunications carrier GTE Corp., according to General Dynamics executive vice president Gordon England.

> "Our interest is in government agencies," England said.

"Our interest is in government agencies," England said of General Dynamics, a multinational company headquartered in Falls Church, Va. "That is our everyday activity."

He said the $1.05 billion acquisition will bring positive changes for GTE Government Systems' customers.

"We have a lean, quick organization with short, tight lines of communications," he said. "We expect our companies to run their businesses efficiently, and we give them the authority to do that."

General Dynamics began looking at GTE Government Systems after forming its own Information Systems and Technology Group two years ago.

General Dynamics formerly focused on platforms such as submarines and surface ships, in which information technology was becoming more tightly integrated.

"It was evident that to maintain our systems capabilities, we needed to move beyond the platforms themselves," England said. "Of all the companies we looked at, the best fit was GTE Government Systems. We were hoping it would come onto the market."

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